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## Unmanned Aerial Systems aid 1st AF mission

By Carol Carpenter  
AFNORTH Public Affairs

**TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla.** – A conference co-hosted by Headquarters Air Force Operations Division and First Air Force addressed issues related to Unmanned Aerial Systems' access into the national airspace system. The conference attracted dozens of Air Force and other stakeholders to 1st Air Force Dec. 9-11.

The conference, which included participants from other military branches of service and federal civilian agencies, including the Federal Aviation Administration, focused on ways the Air Force can consolidate its efforts with other organizations to gain access into the national airspace system.



Unmanned aircraft are currently used by the Air Force for long-endurance, medium and high altitude surveillance and reconnaissance missions, and operate primarily outside the borders of the United States in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

“We’re working toward developing standardized policies and procedures—a necessary template—for all services to integrate and gain FAA approval for domestic UAS operations,” said 1st Air Force commander Maj. Gen. Garry Dean. “The conference was very successful in helping us set some important milestones for achieving these goals.”

Improved access into the national airspace system, General Dean emphasized, will be important for 1st Air Force’s homeland air defense and Defense Support of Civil Authorities missions and will also enhance future training for these missions.

Performing its varied missions in conjunction with North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command, 1st Air Force not only protects U.S. skies from hostile air attacks, the organization also responds as needed to natural and manmade disasters, such as hurricanes, massive wildfires, major floods and chemical spills.

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## 2-2-2 UAS

“Our ultimate goal in seeking improved access to the national airspace system is to provide our military and civilian partners with information they need to save lives and mitigate property and infrastructure damage,” General Dean stated. “Among other things, unmanned aircraft allow us to better integrate aerial imagery with our search and rescue capabilities.

Because unmanned vehicles are becoming an increasingly important part of the Air Force’s ability to achieve its homeland defense missions, UAS training at 1st Air Force will be enhanced in the future, General Dean said. “Because of the no-fail nature of our mission, beginning in 2011, 1st Air Force, NORAD and USNORTHCOM will schedule actual UAS exercises. Currently, we can only use unmanned aircraft in real-world situations.”

The greatest benefit in using unmanned aircraft, the general continued, is that they can be safely operated for much longer periods of time than regular manned aircraft. “They can be used persistently in ways that manned flights cannot be,” he said.

Maj. Gen. Marke Gibson, who also attended the conference, is director of operations and deputy chief of staff for Air Force Operations, Plans and Requirements at the Pentagon. His directorate is responsible for policy, guidance and oversight of the Air Force’s air, space, cyber and weather operations.

According to General Gibson, one of the main challenges related to the UAS program is the widespread misunderstanding about the safety of unmanned aircraft, also known as remotely piloted aircraft, or RPAs.

“We’re dealing with a lack of understanding and knowledge about these systems,” he said. “Because they are unmanned, there is a negative connotation that they are out there roaming around like ‘machine sharks,’ but, in fact, they are remotely controlled by a qualified pilot who is in control and responsible for them at all times.”

General Gibson said one of the Air Force’s top priorities is the safety of all aircraft under its control, including UASs. “No one is more concerned with safety of operations than the Air Force,” he emphasized.

The Air Force is now working with a task force composed of other Department of Defense organizations, including the Army, Navy, and Marines, as well as the FAA to improve UAS operations for all military services, General Gibson noted.

“My office has the responsibility to work the integration portion of UAS operations, and this conference is part of that focus,” he said. “Our overall goal is to prove the value of unmanned aircraft in combat and to grow these operations exponentially. We are excited that the FAA and our sister services are assisting us in this endeavor.”